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ABSTRACT

Until 1980 online information retrieval and dissemination services were for the most part based in the United States. Today, however, a variety of information services as well as packet-switched networks are emerging in other countries. Although U.S. developed software still predominates in overall use, activity in Europe and other countries is developing rapidly. Information access services are coming to be seen not only as economically viable, but also as an essential part of each country's national interests. A rivalry between government subsidized services and competitive nonsubsidized services is emerging. Competitive services discourage monopolistic practices and offer the user protection from access controls and price exploitation with the assurance of high quality service and supplier responsiveness. Government subsidized services have encouraged tariff barriers and bilateral agreements detrimental to the user's interests; a user's bill of rights is needed in the areas of privacy, charges, domestic and international telecommunications, availability of services, access to source documents, and encouragement of competition. (RAA)

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THE EMERGING INTERNATIONALISM OF ONLINE INFORMATION RETRIEVAL

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THE EMERGING INTERNATIONALISM OF ONLINE INFORMATION RETRIEVAL

Until 1980 online information retrieval and dissemination services were for the most part based in the United States. Several reasons accounted for this situation:

- Retrieval software - DIALOG, ORBIT, STAIRS - developed in the U.S.
- Through government sponsorship, a market for these services began in the early 1970s
- Open telecommunications policy and pioneering by TYMSHARE enabled early economical data communications and demand concentration to a single host site
- The further pioneering efforts of TYMSHARE resulted in the establishment of international data linkage to Europe in 1975

Today, however, we see a variety of information services as well as packet-switched networks emerging in other countries. Although U.S. developed software systems still predominate in terms of overall use, new retrieval languages are also appearing. Whereas Europe has the most highly organized activity outside the U.S., other countries are developing rapidly. The significance of all of this activity is that information access services are coming to be seen not only as economically viable, but also as an essential part of each country's national interest.

With no omnipotent planner, there are at least two sometimes opposing forces at work guiding the evolution of this post-industrial, information society. These are national and international government-based planning organizations on the one hand, and competitive free enterprise together with not-for profit organizations on the other. Too often the interest of the recipients of these services - the librarian or information user is given only secondary consideration. Given the options of public planning versus competitive free enterprise, which is the more desirable, or can the two act in a cooperative rather than conflictive manner? Let us consider some of the issues involved in these questions from the point of view of the information user's best interest.

Subsidized vs. Non-subsidized Services

Most European services are operated by government entities on a subsidized basis. In the U.S. we have examples of information services operated by both subsidized and non-subsidized government, commercial, and not-for-profit organizations. Subsidization can be detrimental if it results in driving out competing, non-subsidized services and encourages monopoly or dependence on the subsidized service by the user.

In the last century there existed a rare variety of horses on a small island off the coast of Africa. These horses were desired by European horse breeders to strengthen a certain strain of livery horses. The problem was that the horses had been left so long on their own they were crafty and wise, and could not be captured by traditional means. The horse traders called in a specialist who assured them he would be successful. He began making daily visits to the island each day taking a bushel of oats which he left near the horses' water hole in a small canyon. At first the oats were left untouched - the horses being wary of this new presence. Gradually though, the more venturesome animals sampled the food and found it to their liking. After two weeks the herd would await his arrival each day, for they had given up foraging on their own. At this point capture was an easy matter, and the horses were led away to their inevitable fate. Similarly with subsidized or no-charge services, such services tend to eliminate competition, and make us ever more dependent on the supplier of the subsidized service. Such subsidized services I allege, are not in the users' best interest.

Competition

Competition is the information user's ultimate insurance policy. The benefits of this policy are:

- Protection from price exploitation
- Protection from access controls
- Assurance of high quality service
- Assurance of supplier responsiveness

Such an insurance policy is currently available to all information users when they sign up with the service or services of their choice. How does one maintain the policy in effect? Avoid becoming dependent on the free oats.

It is important though that all competitors in the area play by the same rules - which is not the case when government organizations compete with free enterprise. In determining costs, government organizations typically expense or write-off computer equipment and other fixed assets in the year of acquisition. Such fixed assets are typically not charged as costs against the income derived from them. In industry fixed assets are charged against the income they produce, over the life of the asset. Governments also borrow funds and pay interest. Again, the interest is not charged to the project benefiting from the borrowed funds. Because of differences in accounting rules, it might appear that it costs a government organization less to operate a service which thus justifies a lower price. In actuality, governments simply are not organized to provide project cost accounting and cannot reflect true costs in pricing. In the U.S., for example, information retrieval service pricing by government agencies is often set at a level that barely recovers royalties and direct operating labor. This means a large unusing population must bear the cost differential through taxes. Competition, between these government services and free enterprise services is often maintained only because of the poor quality of services provided by the government organizations, a highly undesirable situation at best. If there is a single, user-benefit axiom, it is that the long-term best interest of the user is served by an environment that encourages competition.

Tariff Barriers to Competition

U.S. information services who developed the market for information retrieval services in Europe now find themselves in a deteriorating situation with regard to competing in Europe. The European Common Market Commission has organized a highly subsidized packet-switched network service throughout Europe called EURONET which will provide telecommunications services to European hosts for a price of roughly $5.00 per hour.

Although several U.S. information services companies have applied for interconnection to EURONET, all have been refused. European customers wishing to continue to use U.S. services must pay approximately $30.00 per hour for telecommunications. In the end such a price represents a de facto tariff of $16 per hour.

A frustrating postscript to this situation is that most of the important databases offered by the European hosts are U.S. developed, often at public expense. Furthermore, to add insult to injury, various bilateral agreements exist between U.S. and non-U.S. government agencies which prohibit U.S. hosts such as DIALOG from even offering public domain databases in Europe and elsewhere.

Clearly tariff barriers and bilateral agreements tend to discourage competition, and are not in the user's best interest.

Users' Bill of Rights

We have now considered several issues of concern to information users. But how can concern be translated into action? Let me propose that various information users' organizations draw up an "Information Users' Bill of Rights." The purpose of a bill of rights is to protect a citizenry from the actions of over-zealous governments by providing a policy framework for, and a limited domain within which laws can be enacted. Let me review a few points which should be included in an information users' bill of rights.

RESOLVED that because access to recorded information is a fundamental need in any society which affects the intellectual and physical productivity of that society, information users should be guaranteed certain rights if they are to utilize information services effectively to the benefit of their society:

1. Privacy. Users have a right to know that their searches are not subject to review by third parties including government organizations without their knowledge and consent.
2. Fair and Equal Charges. Service contracts should be equivalent

worldwide except for clearly identifiable, out-of-pocket cost differences which occur in the provision of the services.

3. Domestic Telecommunications. Telecommunications, if a government monopoly, regulated or not, should be offered at the lowest price possible consistent with cost recovery. Telecommunications services should not cross-subsidize other forms of communications. Competition in the provision of telecommunications services should be encouraged.

4. International Telecommunications. Telecommunications points-of-entry fees should be reciprocal on an end-to-end basis throughout the world and should not be imposed as a tariff or international trade barrier.

5. Denial of Service. No government shall establish restrictions which will prevent users in one country from accessing databases in other countries.

6. Source Documents. As a result of the protection privilege of copyright which they enjoy, publishers have an obligation to provide or permit the provision of single copies of source documents and articles at reasonable prices.

7. Competition. An environment which encourages fair competition should be fostered.

This list of statements can no doubt be extended. Furthermore, there are undoubtedly other areas that should be included. But to the extent that users formulate and express these rights, and can develop sanctions to encourage compliance, the user's voice will have a profound effect on the information policy of governments, service suppliers and database producers.